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AVIAN HAVEN

Wild Bird Rehabilitation Center

A Tribute
in Loving Memory
of
Emma and Oscar

Foster Parents
for orphaned
Barred Owls
2001-2013



Emma

Admitted January 8, 2000

Avian Haven was barely a year old when we first met the Barred Owl we later named Emma. She had been hit by a car less than a mile from our location in Freedom, and rescued by a neighbor we also met for the first time that night, Frank Silvia. The wrist area of one wing was damaged; there was a compound fracture of the metacarpal bone, and the alula (the avian equivalent of the human thumb) had been torn off.



Although the wing wounds healed, her flight was very slow to recover; it was April before she could get across a songbird cage. By mid-summer, her flight was still very limited. She could just barely fly the 40' length of our first raptor flight cage.



Prospects for eventual release remained guarded, but if there was to be a recovery, it would take more time. We requested permission to keep her in rehab until the spring of 2001. Terry had just completed an "annex" to the raptor flight cage, and it had been designed as a habitat for owls needing longer-term care.

When we received an orphaned Barred Owl in the summer of 2000, we naturally housed the juvenile with the adult. As is evident from this photo, the injured bird did a great job as a foster mom!



Photo by Marc Payne, 2000

Oscar

Admitted March 17, 2001

That following spring, we received another Barred Owl - one that had been kept as an education bird by retiring rehabilitator Rae Perry for several years previously. This individual had come to Rae with a humerus fracture, and it had not healed well. In our flight cage, the bird demonstrated limited flying ability that we thought had a chance of improving in time with exercise.

Meanwhile, the flight managed by Emma (though we had not named her at that time) had become somewhat better; she had more strength, but due to the missing alula, lacked maneuverability. We requested and received permission to extend the stay of BOTH birds in rehab.

The two crippled adult birds were housed together and got along well. During the summer of 2001, they raised two orphaned youngsters. But by fall, we knew that neither adult would be releasable; both had partial flight capability, but neither flew well enough for a return to the wild. We requested permits to keep them as surrogate parents, and received those permits on December 31, 2001.

It was time to name them! We were certain that the first bird was female, on the basis of her large size. We named her Emma, after her rescuer's mother. The second bird, smaller than Emma, was believed male and named Oscar, after Oscar Sabin of Palermo, whose backhoe had prepared the site for construction of "the Annex" that had become their home.



Photo by Marc Payne

The next few years were just a bit before the era of digital photography; we could find very few photos of these birds in Marc's slide archives. This one was taken in 2008; Emma is peering out of the nest box, and Oscar is on the right. From 2002 through that year, they raised another seven youngsters.

2009 was an important year for our Barred Owls! For one thing, Emma and Oscar raised another two youngsters in the summer, one of which is shown here with Emma.



Photo by Marc Payne



Here they are in October 2009, after the young had fledged. Oscar is on top of the nest box.

Little did they know that, all summer long, Terry had been building a new structure - a compound dedicated for owl use. Our two foster birds would soon move into a luxurious new home.



The compound had four habitats, one of which was designated for the resident surrogate parents and their future foster kids.



However one of their favorite spots would become a perch alongside a high look-out. ★



A tunnel connecting to other habitats could be opened up as needed when the youngsters fledged.

Jerry Stefansky made Emma and Oscar two deluxe nest boxes. They preferred the one in the back corner, and there they would often be found.

Oct. 31, 2009 was their first day in their new home.



It didn't take long at all for them to find that high look-out! Oscar is on the left, Emma on the right.

But they explored every nook and cranny!
Here, Oscar tries out a flutter pole.



Photos on this and following slides by Glori Berry.



Emma checks out her new nest box.

Here they are a week later: November 7, 2009

Emma



Oscar



They had the winter of 2009-2010 to set up house-keeping for the coming nesting season. These photos were taken in January 2010.





January 2010

Summer 2010 - another two orphans are raised.



Emma is on the left, Oscar on the right, and one of the kids in the middle.



Emma is
elsewhere
at the
moment.



Oscar (right) babysits.





January 2011:
They are up
at the look-
out, taking a
break from
child-rearing.

The breeding season of 2011 became a well-known one, with the story of the three young foster Barred Owls they raised that year told in our "[Some of the Kids](#)" slide show of that year. Some photos from that series (and a few new ones) are shown below and in the next five slides:





Oscar is on the right in most of these, but 2nd from right above.



2011,
cont'd.



A change in the photographer's perspective!





Emma





Oscar





Oscar

More from
2011



Emma

They raised three more in 2012.





Emma



Oscar

2012, cont'd.



Oscar

2012 would be their last breeding season as a couple. On January 7, 2013 (just one day short of thirteen years since her injury), we found Emma lying on the ground, barely alive, when we went to their habitat for our regular morning check. We brought her inside to an intensive care unit, where she died a short while later.

We were so devastated by her loss that we could hardly bring ourselves to do a necropsy. But when we did . . . everything looked normal except her liver, which had an unusual appearance that we attributed to old age. We had no way of knowing how old she was when she was injured, but for context, the oldest individual in the wild known on the basis of banding records had lived 18 years.

Oscar carried on without Emma in the summer of 2013, when another three youngsters were in care.





Left: Oscar
Above: one of the
2013 youngsters



Oscar is on the left, with an older juvenile on the right₃₂

In the fall of 2013, after the summer orphans had been released, a two-year-old in long-term care due to eye injuries seemed to form a bond with Oscar. They were often seen together on top of Oscar's favorite nest box.



Oscar

If this bird's vision had not improved, we would have considered her as a replacement for Emma. But it was not to be - our ophthalmologist friend Steve Witkin examined her eyes in December, and found them well healed.

We left them housed together, knowing that the we would wait until warmer weather to release the younger bird. But on the morning of January 16, Oscar was found dead on top of the nest box. A few days later, our necropsy revealed lesions and a blood clot on the liver. Although we could say that the cause of death was most likely liver failure, old age was certainly a factor.



But one other very interesting thing was revealed by an examination of the internal organs: ovaries. Small size notwithstanding, Oscar's was female!

We had often wondered why they never bred. But thinking back: in the late summer of 2005, Marc found four eggs in their nest box; they had obviously never hatched. We thought little of it at the time, other than to note that Emma had laid more eggs than the typical clutch size of 2-3, and to speculate that Oscar was too old to fertilize them. Now we realize that each of the birds had most likely laid two eggs, a thought supported by Marc's recollection that two of them were smaller than the other two. But in all the years since, no other eggs were ever found. Perhaps they realized that they would never have kids of their own, and became content with their roles as foster parents.

And they were WONDERFUL in that regard! Whenever we were brought rescued nestlings, our first priority was to try to reunite them with their own moms and dads. But although that effort often succeeded, there were times when it did not, and the birds had to remain in our care.



Youngsters who had lost their homes and parents would arrive bewildered and frightened. But all that would quickly be remedied.

We would make sure that the new arrivals were stable and uninjured, then place them in the nest box. Emma and Oscar would immediately take over brooding and feeding.



In Emma and Oscar's expert foster care, the youngsters would grow up in a situation as close as possible to a natural one.





In the fall, we would release the juveniles here, in close proximity to the habitat in which they'd grown up. They could still "talk" to Emma and Oscar, and either stay around or disperse, as they chose.



Sometimes we would see (or hear) one or more of the juveniles for several days after release - as we did with this one, released in 2011.

This youngster, released in 2012, was the last of the kids raised by both parents to be seen after his release in September. "Junior" remained nearby well into November, readily coming for mice left out in a convenient spot.



He often took them into a nearby tree to eat . . .

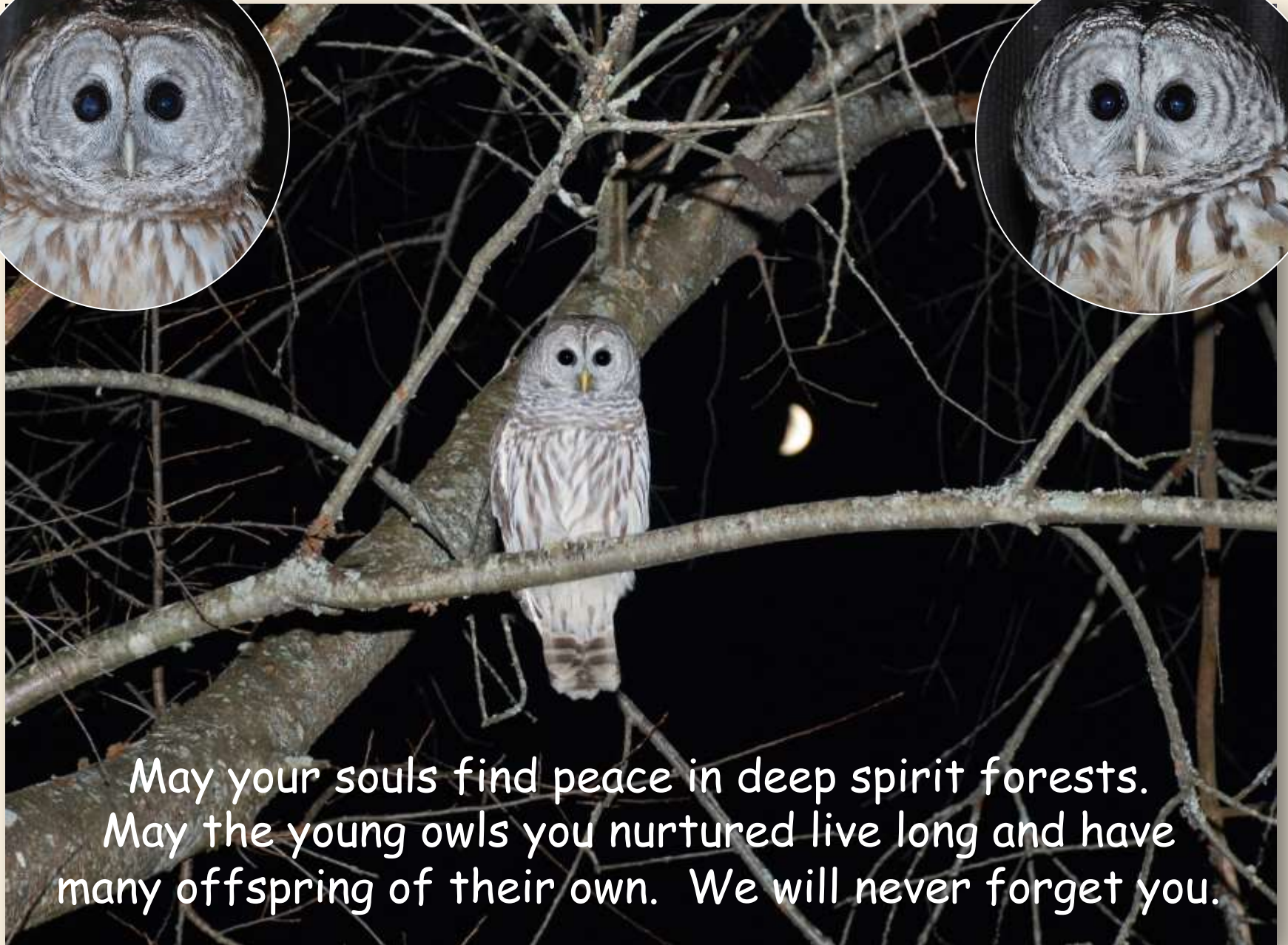


... and would then depart for parts unknown. We would not see him again until dusk the next day.





We had no way of knowing at the time that these photos of Junior would come to symbolize Emma and Oscar's legacy.⁴²



May your souls find peace in deep spirit forests.
May the young owls you nurtured live long and have
many offspring of their own. We will never forget you.